

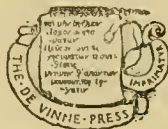
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HISTORIC HOUSES
of **LITCHFIELD**

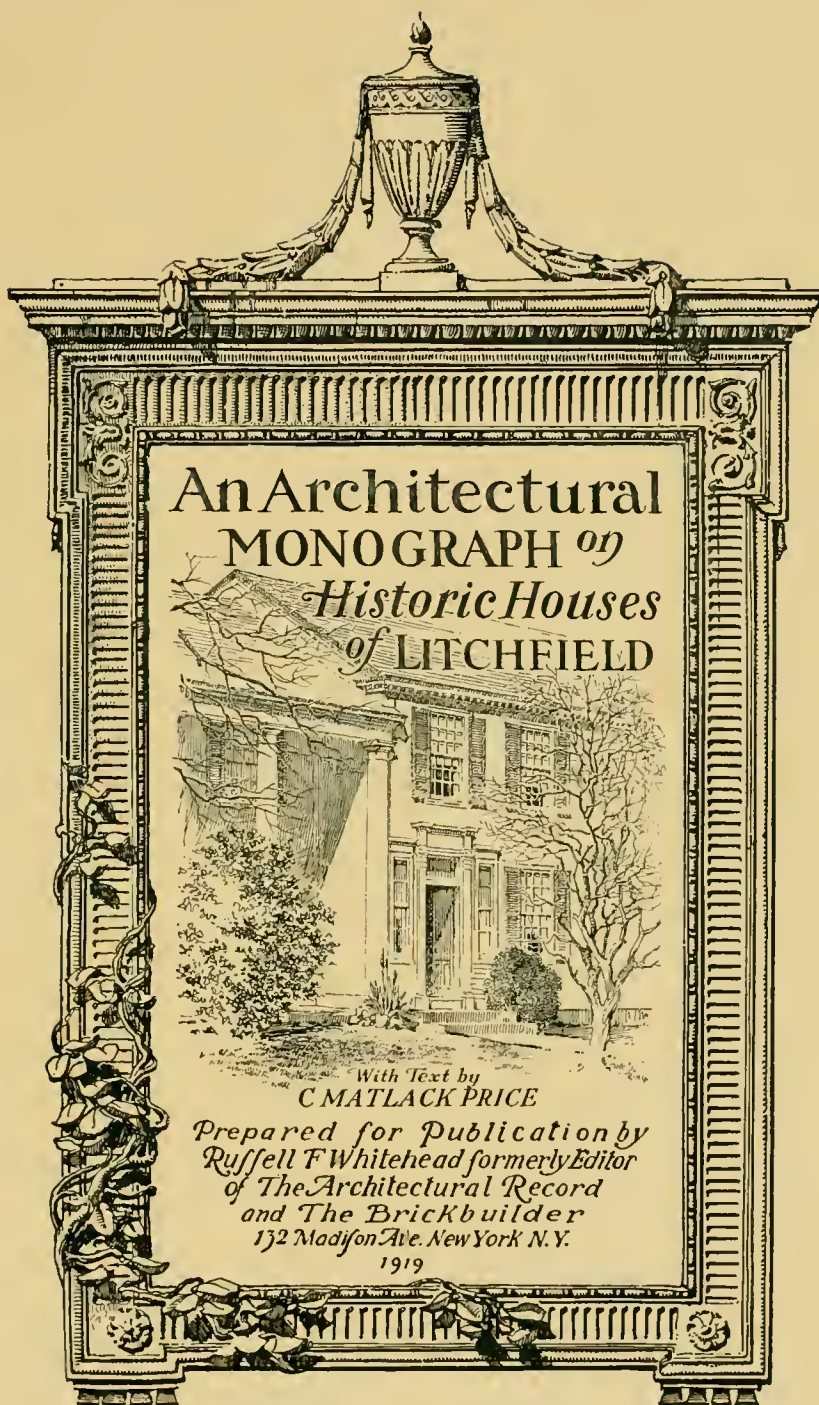
With Introductory Text by
C Matlack Price

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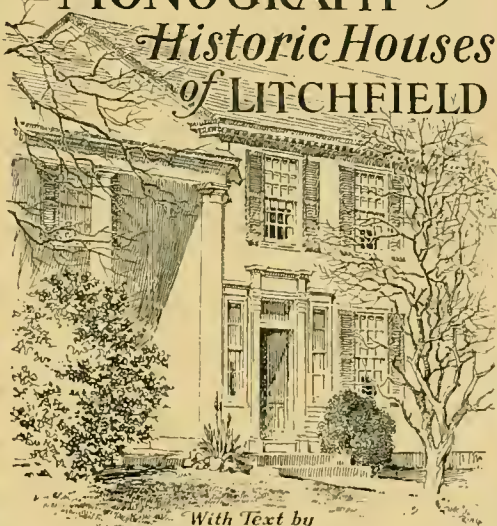
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An Architectural
MONOGRAPH *of*
Historic Houses
of LITCHFIELD



With Text by
C MATLACK PRICE

Prepared for Publication by
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and *The Brickbuilder*
132 Madison Ave. New York N.Y.

1919



THE SHELDON HOUSE, LITCHFIELD, CONNECTICUT. Built in 1760.
Detail of Entrance and Front Façade.

An interesting minor detail is seen in the device of relating the central projection to the main walls by carrying the entablature of the colonnade over the first story window-heads.

The WHITE PINE SERIES of ARCHITECTURAL MONOGRAPHS

A BI-MONTHLY PUBLICATION SUGGESTING THE
ARCHITECTURAL USES OF WHITE PINE AND ITS
AVAILABILITY TODAY AS A STRUCTURAL WOOD

Vol. V

JUNE, 1919

No. 3

HISTORIC HOUSES OF LITCHFIELD

By C. MATLACK PRICE

Mr. Price, at one time editor of "The Architectural Record," and author of "The Practical Book of Architecture," has been known for some years as an able and discerning critic of architecture.—EDITOR'S NOTE.

PHOTOGRAPHS BY KENNETH CLARK

THE poets have said it, and it is true, eternally true—the hill-man turns ever to his hills, and the mariner ever to his seas. And it is with the same instinct that a New Englander turns ever to New England, and finds it as dearly familiar, as much a place of old and known abode as it is essentially different from any other part of the United States.

This one feels with a peculiar intensity on coming back to New England, after some years away. Gray stone walls, old orchards, spreading elms—and always the good, quiet, unpretending houses of other years. The stranger says that New England is austere, even forbidding; but to the New Englander it is ever gentle, ever welcoming. Gray skies, the soft mantle of sea fogs near the coast, the simple oldness and the spirit of quiet and sincere times, these blend themselves, in some way, into a thing that is the spirit of New England.

A typical New England village, founded before the Revolutionary War, and reaching the zenith of its development in 1830 or thereabout, is like no other place in the world. It is a reflection, in contemporary terms, of the lives and ideals of the people who built it; and because of this fact it possesses, in its very essence, qualities of simplicity and sincerity which, to-day, we find difficult immediately to comprehend or appraise.

There are many such villages scattered through the New England States, from Connecticut to Maine, and many smaller villages, remote from the railroads, sleep beneath their over-arching elms, "the world forgetting, by the world forgot."

Although Connecticut is the southernmost of the New England States, its atmosphere is distinctly that of New England, seeming to borrow nothing from adjacent New York State. And so strong (even though undefinable in exact terms) is this "atmosphere" of New England that there is much in common between the seaport towns and the inland towns.

True, the seaport towns have incomparable vistas of blue harbors, and the masts of ships seen at the ends of narrow streets, between silver-gray or white-clapboarded houses; yet the same charm, the same spirit that is *only* New England, pervades the old inland villages. Perhaps they are like two tunes composed with the same melody, or two pictures painted with the same range of colors—variations of the same theme.

Among the older inland towns of New England, specifically of Connecticut, one of the most interesting is Litchfield, founded in 1721. The village, as it appeared at the beginning of the next century, would have seemed, to the founders, a splendidly sophisticated place, an eminently satisfying crowning of their first rude endeavors. To realize clearly just what the Litchfield we see to-day actually means, its pleasant, spacious houses, its serene dignity must be set before a background of the epic simplicity and ruggedness of its pioneer beginnings. And so, a few paragraphs of history, of what is really the epic history of many a similar settlement in New England.

As early as 1715, one John Marsh, a citizen of Hartford, was sent to explore the "Western Lands," as they were called, and he set forth,

with a horse and a flint-lock musket, through the trails of trappers and hunters. Thus the spot that was to become Litchfield was found—a beautiful spot, with lakes and timber and good farm lands, and a deed of land was duly bought from the Indians for fifteen pounds. Three years later the land was partitioned into holdings for the charter settlers, fifty-five in number, under Deacon John Buel of Lebanon and John Marsh of Hartford, and in 1721 the village was definitely founded and named Litchfield. Pos-

For many years the safety of the little group of settlers depended upon scouts ever watchful of the movements of surrounding Indians, whose war-dance yells could be heard on the distant hills, while their signal fires gleamed on Mount Tom. In the midst of these perils, and undaunted by their daily hardships and primitive equipment, the founders of Litchfield gradually evolved the beginnings of the peaceful and comfortable village of later years. Their hardships, their toil, their achievements—these are so stim-



THE GOVERNOR WOLCOTT HOUSE, SOUTH STREET, LITCHFIELD, CONNECTICUT.

Built in 1753.

The unusual moulding detail of the pediments over the first story windows is shown in a special illustration on page eleven.

sible error of a clerk is supposed to account for the letter "t," which is not used in the spelling of Lichfield, England, after which the Connecticut village was named.

The pioneers were agriculturists, and the first industries were the grist-mill, sawmill and blacksmith shop; the first tradesman, a clothier. The grist-mill, it seems, was distinctly a community institution, and while farmers waited for their bags of corn to be ground, they read notices of town meetings posted on the door of the mill, gossiped, traded, and indulged in theological discussions which, if not profound, were at least intense and heated.

ulating to the imagination that one is reluctant to turn the page.

The oldest house now standing in Litchfield is the Wolcott house, on South Street, built in 1753 by Oliver Wolcott, one of the signers of the Declaration of Independence, and sometime governor of the State. It was in this house that Mr. Wolcott entertained General Washington and Lafayette.

Architecturally, it represents one of the least pretentious as well as one of the most typical examples of the early New England dwelling. The inland towns and villages of New England being, for the most part, less prosperous than



THE TALLMADGE HOUSE, LITCHFIELD, CONNECTICUT. Built in 1775 by Thomas Sheldon.



THE REEVE-WOODRUFF HOUSE, LITCHFIELD, CONNECTICUT.
Built in 1773.



THE SEYMOUR HOUSE, LITCHFIELD, CONNECTICUT.
(Now St. Michael's Rectory.)



AN OLD STORE BUILDING, LITCHFIELD, CONNECTICUT.

Built in 1781.

Originally located on North Street.

The bowed "show windows" with the long hood above suggest distinct possibilities for adaptation.

the seaport towns, less elaboration in architectural detail is found. Not only were the traders and ship-owners of such towns as Salem and Newport more well-to-do than the struggling settlers who depended upon the land for their livelihood, but in the seaport towns there was available far more talent among artisans. This

talent is particularly apparent in such coast towns as Nantucket and the towns on the coast of Maine, as shown in previous issues of the MONOGRAPH SERIES. Most of the beautiful and often intricate carving and moulding of the old doorways of these towns was the work of skilled

(Text continued on page eleven)



THE HUBBARD HOUSE, LITCHFIELD, CONNECTICUT. Built in 1833.
Detail of South Doorway.



THE BUTLER HOUSE, LITCHFIELD, CONNECTICUT. Built in 1792.
Detail of Doorway on Corner of North and East Streets.



THE BUTLER HOUSE, LITCHFIELD, CONNECTICUT. Built in 1792.



THE PHELPS HOUSE, LITCHFIELD, CONNECTICUT.

The oldest house on East Street, built in 1782.

carpenters and carvers, who were enabled, during inclement weather, to spend months of labor upon the embellishment of the better houses.

Fortunately for those of us who would study and admire their craftsmanship, the vigor and often the unstudied genius of their designs, the wood preëminently used by early American builders was seasoned white pine. This wood, often unprotected for years from the hard New England winters, has survived unimpaired. Whether or not they gave thought to its long endurance, it is certain that those early artisans used white pine because of its ready response to the tool, and its adaptability for delicate and elaborate mouldings.

An interesting and unusual moulding detail is seen in the pediments of the first floor windows of the Wolcott house—a mitered break which was a favorite device of early American woodworkers.

Opposite the Wolcott house, on South Street, stands the Reeve-Woodruff house, built in 1773 by Judge Tapping Reeve, who founded here in 1784 the first law school of the United States.



First Story Window Detail.
THE GOVERNOR WOLCOTT HOUSE,
LITCHFIELD, CONNECTICUT.
Built in 1753.



Entrance Detail.
THE GOVERNOR WOLCOTT HOUSE,
LITCHFIELD, CONNECTICUT.
Built in 1753.

Litchfield has also the distinction of having seen the foundation (and flourishing success) of the first "female seminary" or finishing school for the more advanced education of "young ladies."

A picture of the village of that time enlivens the imagination, and throws something of the glamour of romance over quaint, elm-shaded Litchfield:

"Imagine these now quiet streets, with red coaches rattling through them, with signs of importer, publisher, goldsmith, hatter, etc., hanging on the shops, with young men arriving on horseback to attend the Law School, and divide their attention between their studies of the law and studies of the pretty girls of the 'Female Academy.' Then there were some gay bloods from the South, so much at home in the town that they disported themselves in pink gingham frock-coats."

So said an eye-witness. Whether or not the pioneers would have quite approved of the sartorial dandiness of pink frock-coats we know not, but it is certain they would have been proud indeed of the distinction which the two



THE SEYMOUR HOMESTEAD, LITCHFIELD, CONNECTICUT.
Built in 1807.



THE W. H. SANFORD HOUSE, LITCHFIELD, CONNECTICUT.
Built by Dr. Alanson Abbey about 1832.

schools conferred upon Litchfield, making it unquestionably the intellectual and cultural center of the vicinity. Litchfield's paper, the *Monitor*, in 1798, speaks of the Public Library as having existed for some time, and prior to 1831 the "Litchfield Lyceum" conducted lectures, debates and weekly meetings. So, in making the wilderness to bloom, the old pioneers had not wrought in vain with the forces of nature and the malignity of surrounding hostile Indians.

The main streets of Litchfield, broad and elm-shaded, intersect at right angles, but the street names do not carry through the intersection. There are thus, as the arms of the cross, North Street, South Street, East Street and West Street. Along North Street are many of the most interesting of Litchfield's old houses, rich in that expression of very conservative and self-respecting domesticity that characterizes early New England dwellings of their type.

The house said to be the third oldest in the town was built in 1760 by Elisha Sheldon, whose son Samuel made it into the famous Sheldon Tavern or Inn.

The central feature of this house, a very agreeably designed Palladian window, above four graceful columns flanking the door, is a distinctly architectural effort, and was repeated, with variation, in the Deming house, directly opposite, across North Street.

Although the old houses of Litchfield are largely of the same type, they show many interesting minor variations, and in many instances some one detail must immediately delight the discerning eye of the architect. Take, for ex-

ample, the very ordinary and uninspiring structure of "Ye Old Curiosity Shoppe" (shown in the picture on page seven)—then discover the brilliant possibilities of adapting the quaint bowed windows with the long hood above them.

To comment, however, upon the current uses which may be made of the details and devices of early American architectural design, is either to embark upon an extensive book, or to discount the intelligence of the architect. The message is rather one for the restless and ill-humored critic who bewails the fact that we have no "native architecture" in this country, and must perforce (or because of a fancied lack of architectural imagination and sanity) borrow European styles. The fact is, that if we borrow European styles, certainly we do so from choice, not from necessity, and certainly not because we lack a distinctive and very flexible national style of our own. In the range from the great Southern plantation manor down to the most diminutive Dutch Colonial farmhouse, there are houses to correspond with every status ex-



Entrance Detail.

THE W. H. SANFORD HOUSE, LITCHFIELD, CONNECTICUT.
Built about 1832.

isting in either the Social Register or Dun's or Bradstreet's.

Perhaps there is an increasing general appreciation of the possibilities and variations to be found in the whole range of early American architecture. By an exact application of the word "Colonial," which is more often used very inexactly, there would exist no designation for the first architecture of the American nation, and all work subsequent to 1776 would either be wrongly named, or would exist without a name.



Entrance Detail.

THE SEYMOUR HOMESTEAD, LITCHFIELD, CONN.

For this reason, the term "Early American," while a little vague for exact definition, should be more generally used than the misapplied term "Colonial," for it embraces not only all pre-Revolutionary work, but also the whole range of American architecture from 1776, through the Classic Revival, which flourished from 1830 until about 1840, or a little later.

"Colonial," too, is inexact because it recognizes no distinction of locality. And certainly there are wide differences between the early buildings of New England and those of the Southern States, not to speak of the locally characteristic styles of Pennsylvania and those parts of New Jersey and New York States which were first settled by the Dutch.

Most important of all the aspects of early American architecture is the consideration of its general spirit, which seems to make itself felt irrespective of locality or of the specific type or style peculiar to a given locality. Yet this spirit is by no means easy to define, for it is made up of several fundamental traits which are nearly always apparent in our earlier buildings. Above all, early American builders built as well as they knew how, both in terms of design and of material. They did not attempt styles which

they did not understand, and they used the most honest and enduring materials available.

Therefore, "style," or "type," did not in the least trouble the builders of Litchfield, and hence the beautiful, unconscious consistency of the place. They were not trying to be clever or ostentatious—they were trying simply to design and build decent, homelike abodes for themselves. As to their success in this—*si monumentum requiris*—there are the illustrations of this monograph, and there is Litchfield itself.

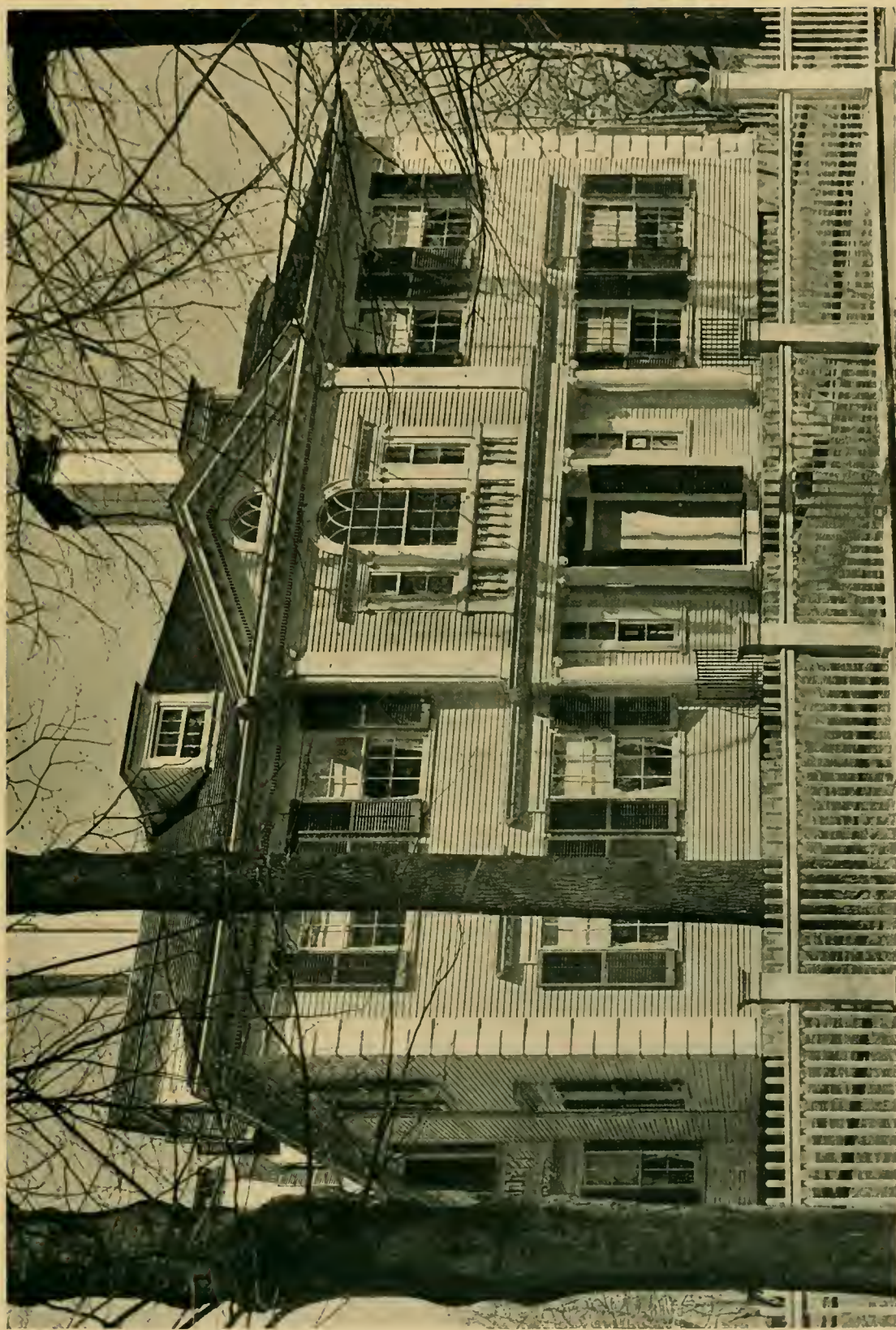
An ancient mile-stone, just outside the village, gives Litchfield as 102 miles from New York City, by the old King's Highway. Not far, yet we should be glad that old Litchfield is not readily accessible. Such places are easily, very easily spoiled by even a little ill-blended modernity. And they are among the most vital and significant of our national possessions—records and reminders of the lives of dignified aspiration and integrity that built this nation.

Let us reckon this one hundred and two miles from New York by stage-coach (leaving, let us say, Fraunces' Tavern), not by motor car, so that we may keep old Litchfield, serene and unspoiled as it was at the end of last century, in the realm of things "far away and long ago."



Front Door.

THE HUBBARD HOUSE, LITCHFIELD, CONN.



THE DEMING HOUSE, NORTH STREET, LITCHFIELD, CONNECTICUT. Built in 1793.



A HOUSE ON NORTH STREET, LITCHFIELD, CONNECTICUT.

Built in 1785.



THE SANFORD HOUSE, LITCHFIELD, CONNECTICUT.

Built in 1771.

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